

Skills and social change in postsocialistic Mongolia

May 7 2018



Credit: Leiden University

How do people living in a remote part of Northern Mongolia experience the post-socialist transition that occurred twenty years ago? Based on extensive fieldwork, cultural anthropologist Richard Fraser argues that this is not at all clear. In his Ph.D. dissertation, he developed a new framework based on skills to better understand the differing experiences of postsocialist change. Ph.D. defense 14 May.

Since the collapse of state socialism, Mongolia has experienced rising inflation, increased corruption, and government mismanagement. This has resulted in a lack of stable employment and livelihood opportunities.

Large numbers of people have become highly uncertain about their future, who commonly describe themselves as somehow "lost in the transition."

Stories of skill

Fraser wanted to gain insight into the [experiences](#) that make these people feel "lost in transition." Therefore, he focused on [skills](#). He explored how skills changed, disappeared, got passed on and emerged in this period of postsocialist transition.

One example of changing skills is the use of new technologies. In recent years, motorcycles, mobile phones, and solar panels have become ubiquitous features of herding life. However, this is among others entwined with the remote conditions in rural Mongolia which limits the use of these technologies. Mobile phone coverage, for example, is highly sporadic and often unavailable for herders. As a result, the herders have to complement their knowledge of the landscape, including migration routes of their flock and use-rights to pasture, with new locations specifics for mobile phones. In order to make phone calls, people specifically travel to mountaintops, hills, or other vantage points which are known for existing mobile reception.



In the shadow of the city. Credit: Leiden University

Fraser also found that herders embody tremendous skill using their motorcycles. It is actually comparable to their skill level at horse riding. This includes quickly yet safely riding across the grasslands, avoiding potential hazards such as pot-holes, and memorising new and efficient travel routes. "The incorporation of motorcycles in herding lives is not as a degeneration or negative 'loss of tradition,' but as facilitating new forms of herding tied to the generation of new skills."

In order to better understand the differing experiences of postsocialist change, Fraser developed a new framework based on "skilled practice." This approach envisions all kinds of transmissions of skills: skills that are

re/produced between the generations, new skills that are learned due to change, and skills that are adapted in relation to the changing social, economic, and political contexts. By extending the concept 'skill' in this way and observing transformations in skilled practice, social scientists get better insights into a more diverse range of processes that people experience in their everyday lives.



An advertisement for Mobicom (Mongolia Telecom), featuring a herder and his mobile phone. Credit: Leiden University

The fundamental role of skills

Fraser aims that his research also helps other researchers and policy makers to recognize the fundamental role of skills as the foundation of people's experiences of postsocialist change. "Skill is not only at the core of how people experience change, but is also the creative capacity through which they flexibly engage with the manifestations of such change."

By looking at people learning and adjusting their skills while making their way through the world, skills can be seen as the imaginative potential through which [people](#) actively engage with the changing dimensions of their lifeworlds. Fraser hopes that his own friends in Mongolia will continue to adapt and rearrange their skills in the face of increasing uncertainty.

Provided by Leiden University

Citation: Skills and social change in postsocialistic Mongolia (2018, May 7) retrieved 5 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-05-skills-social-postsocialistic-mongolia.html>

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